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### Interview with Bonita Hester

Tonya Holt  
*Fort Hays State University*

Bonita Hester

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Tonya: Mrs. Hester, could you tell me how you first became interested in teaching?

Bonita: Well, I've been interested in teaching all my life, even when I was a little girl growing up. I had two or three nephews and we played school. I fixed a little grade book, and you wouldn't believe what we had for a desk. My mother gave me her oven from a kerosene stove (they were portable) and that's what I used for my desk. We even had an orchestra. I used curtain rods. We hummed through the curtain rods. So, all my life I have been interested in teaching. My mother and father boarded and roomed teachers as I was growing up, and maybe that's where I developed the love for teaching.

Then circumstances happened after I grew up. I was married and had two little children. They lost their dad and I knew I had to support myself. So, the first thing I thought of was going into teaching. At the time, it was the end of the war (1941); there was a teacher shortage. So, I took what little insurance money I got and I went to Fort Hays. I took eight hours and I could teach on eight hours. That next fall, in September, I got my first school.

Tonya: Could you tell me where that school was located?

Bonita: It was located eleven miles north of Otis (Kansas) in Rush County.

Tonya: Is that school still standing and, if it is, where is it and what is it used for?

Bonita: The schoolhouse is still intact, but it was moved from its location into the little town of Gorham (Kansas) where it serves as a community church. I drove by it not too long ago to kind of reminisce. It looks pretty good to me. It has a section built on, but it's still the same school.

Tonya: I'd like to talk a little bit about the school, the inside of the school. What was located inside--electricity, gas, water--all that.

Bonita: No electricity. No gas. No water. There was a water well outside. We had a bucket that we got our water from the water well for drinking and washing. We had a basin. There was a dipper in the bucket. For the first few weeks everybody drank out of the same dipper. I didn't like that too well, so everyone brought their own cup.

As far as the lights were concerned, we used a gasoline mantle-type lantern. When we did have evening activities, which wasn't too often, it was usually around Christmas. We'd have our Christmas programs and things like that.

The heat was supplied with coal. I had to build a wood fire and a coal fire. The stove was located in the middle of the room, and the desks were in a line around this room from the smaller desks to the larger desks.

They were two-pupil desks; two people could sit. They were opened on the end. They weren't the lift-up type which came later.

Tonya: Could you tell me about some of the supplies you had for school such as paper, pencils?

Bonita: Everyone brought their own supplies. Very little construction paper was used. I think I bought probably a tablet. Maybe they had their own. I can't remember that, but I know construction paper was really kind of limited. I think we drew a lot, probably on tablet paper. As far as cutting, most of our art work was done with patterns. We traced around and cut out things.

As far as bulletin boards were concerned, I remember that first year of going to a hardware store and getting a great big paper box--carton box. I cut it apart and covered a half of a section of the slate writing board. A lot of things were done, like practicing spelling and ciphering, on these slates. They were posted on the wall.

Tonya: What kind of writing utensils did they use on slates. Was it a chalk-board?

Bonita: Yes. Chalkboard. I would call it a slate. It was different than the green that you and I learned about later on. It's black slate.

Tonya: Did you have outhouses?

Bonita: We certainly did. We had outhouses with the moon and the star cut in the door. The boys had theirs and the girls had theirs. We didn't have one. We had two.

Tonya: Did they have any playground equipment outside?

Bonita: Swings, but most of our play was improvised. When the weather permitted, like in the early fall, we played baseball. There were no basketball goals. We played blackman, which is a game where the "It" stands in the center or maybe there were two people who were "It." Sides were chosen. One side would race through and "It" would try to catch them. That was called blackman.

Tonya: I remember playing that also in grade school.

Bonita: I think it's kind of outlawed now because it can be pretty rough. In the wintertime we would play fox and the geese. That was about it. If it was too cold, we stayed inside.

Tonya: Could you tell me a little bit about a school day--what you did when you first got there in the morning through the afternoon until the children left, what you did schoolwork wise?

Bonita: I remember the first thing I did. I came before the students, of course, and I built my fire in my stove. School started at 9:00 (a.m.). It didn't start at twenty minutes till 9:00. Most of the parents didn't bring their children early. They usually had them there by 9:00. Probably that was because they figured it would be chilly outside or that was just time for school. We'd run through our subjects. Do you want to know about the subjects?

Tonya: Yes, I would really like to hear that.

Bonita: We usually had prayer. Sometimes we prayed the Lord's Prayer. Sometimes I read a scripture. We might have sung a song. Some days we'd sing. We didn't have a piano or an organ. We had song books. The children would choose what they'd like to sing. Those were called our opening exercises.

That first year I had two first graders, and I think we jumped grades from fourth on through the eighth. In all I probably had six grades that first year. Maybe I would have one student in one grade. That first year I had two first graders and one little boy was pretty sharp. The little girl, luckily, moved away. In spite of me, that little boy learned--I was very inexperienced. I was more of a mother than I was probably a school teacher that first year.

They had a recitation bench up front, and when it was time to recite, the class would sit on this recitation bench. I didn't have it too long. I didn't like it. I just didn't feel comfortable with it. My desk was up on a raised platform which also served for a stage when we had our Christmas programs or any other type of program. When I was finished with reading or whatever it was, they had come up to recite, they would go back and do their assigned paper work or written work. Another class would then come up. We had mostly reading and spelling. We devoted quite a bit more time to writing than they do now.

There were no ball points that I can remember. There was the dip pen, the one with the holder and the sharp pen. We had ink and it spilled. I was finally smart enough to collect each bottle. Each child brought their own and we put it in a little box. We set it back somewhere so they wouldn't take it out of their desks.

We had spelling. We had the same spelling lesson or words all week long. There were no work exercises with those words. They just learned to look at the word, learned to spell it, and learned to write it. There were no work books associated--they were hard back spellers.

We had geography. We had very few maps. Most of them were in a case that hung from the wall. We also had a subject in the upper grades called civics. It was probably what we call government now. We had Physiology, which would be compared to Health only it was more concentrated. We learned more about the bones and the different organs and the body.

Tonya: You covered quite a variety of subjects. Were there any set standards for what was required for these kids to learn? Was there certain curriculum you had to use?

Bonita: Yes. In those days we had a county superintendent. I think that was an elected office. Once a year he or she--my first case it was a man--he happened to be my eighth-grade teacher when I was in the eighth grade, and he became county superintendent. He would come around like once a year.

Before school started we would have what was called an "institute." All of the teachers in that county would meet in the county seat. We had a kind of workshop day. He would hand out a guide. Whether that came from the state board of education I don't know. It was a guide in every subject for every grade that told us how far we were supposed to be at a given time. We would strive to be on that page at that given time in every subject. At the end of the school year, you didn't feel right if you didn't finish a book. You had to work until you worked the last page in that book.

Tonya: Was there any kind of testing you had to do at the end of the year for this guideline?

Bonita: Well, only for the eighth grade. They had to take a county examination that was administered by and in the county seat. I suppose it was to see whether they were ready for high school if they were going to go that far. As far as the lower grades, they didn't have any particular test to take. We graded by percentage. We more or less were smart enough to figure out our own percentages.

Tonya: Did you send grades home to the parents?

Bonita: Yes, we had a report card we sent out. I remember one thing on the report card was conduct, and most of them got a 100 or an okay. I think it's mostly okay on that area.

Tonya: How often did you send those home?

Bonita: I suppose every month they got a report card instead of six weeks or nine weeks because we had eight-month school. Our schools lasted from September until April.

Tonya: Do you know when the schoolhouse was built?

Bonita: No, I don't, but it must have been built a long time ago because I was born and raised about a mile south of that school. When I was a year old, my folks moved to town. My brothers and sisters had gone to that school, so it was a home school to me.

Tonya: Who took care of the building? Who took care of maintenance?

Bonita: We did.

Tonya: You and the children?

Bonita: Yes. A lot of times on Friday afternoons we either had a spelling match or a ciphering match, and we would allow maybe the last hour of school for clean up. I remember getting sweeping compound. The floor was hard wood. I'd bring this sweeping compound from town and we'd scatter it after the last recess. It was actually sawdust mixed with some kind of oil. The oil would draw into the boards on the floor and make the floor oily. The children would tromp around on it after that last recess. Before school was out we would have it swept up.

Some of the girls would wash the boards. We called it "clapping the erasers." They'd take the erasers outside. So we cleaned up our building in that manner.

Tonya: How did you handle discipline in the school?

Bonita: I never spanked any of my kids in country school. I had some onery big boys, but I'd just give them a bad look. Probably one of the worst punishments was making them "stand on the floor." All it amounted to was standing beside your desk, but it was embarrassing to them. I don't remember giving out any capital punishment as such.

Tonya: Do you have any idea how other teachers handled that at the time?

Bonita: No, we didn't have a whole lot of communication between teachers. About the only thing we did was before school started. We had this workshop type thing. The schools were far apart.

As far as my first years, we didn't go play baseball. Now later on, in the fourth or fifth country school where I taught, we did exchange baseball games and things like that. We'd go to another school and visit. In my first schools, you went to school and you stayed there until the parents came and got you and until it was time for the teacher to go home.

Tonya: How did you and the children get to and from the school?

Bonita: The parents brought their children. I drove the eleven miles.

Tonya: Did most of the parents have cars?

Bonita: Yes, this was in the early forties, so they had cars. I can remember one night after the children had gone home of being stuck in the school yard. It snowed bad and I couldn't get out of the school yard. There was nothing surfaced. It was just plain grass or field. It was six o'clock, and it was cold and it was getting pretty dark. I was worried how I was going to manage to get out of that school yard.



A farmer came with a wagon with a load of feed on the back of it. He was going to feed his cattle in a pasture right next to the schoolhouse. He helped pull my car out so I could get out on a country road, which was probably sanded to some extent.

Tonya: You made it home okay?

Bonita: I made it home okay.

Tonya: How far away was home?

Bonita: It was eleven miles from town. You never knew when the weather was going to change. I can't remember whether any of the parents came after their children. I think it was snowing real bad. I imagine they did. I don't remember of it happening, not that first year.

Tonya: I'd like to ask you about your pay. Who paid your paychecks? How often did you get them? About how much did you get paid?

Bonita: That first school my paycheck was about 125 dollars a month. I think that was probably good wages. We had a school board which consisted of, I suppose, a chairman or president of the school board, a secretary, and a treasurer. They brought my check to me.

One year in the second schoolhouse where I taught, they evidently hadn't budgeted enough money to keep going all year, and by Christmas time they were short of money or didn't have enough. They couldn't give me my paycheck. Well, I had these two little kids and I had to have Christmas money. So, the treasurer of the school board took a load of wheat to town and sold it. He paid me out of his own pocket. Of course, he was totally reimbursed.

Tonya: Where did they get the funds to build the school? Where did they get the land, the materials, and such?

Bonita: The land was usually owned by a farmer. It was taken over by the school district, although when the schoolhouse was moved, the land went back to the farmer again.

As far as the building, I imagine the people of the community probably got together. I don't think there was any state funds to build that schoolhouse. The people in that locality needed a school for their children, and they furnished the money probably through taxation. I really don't know. I'm just talking from the top of my head.

As far as keeping the school going, that was done from tax money that was provided by the people in that particular area or that district. I know there was no state aid, and I know for sure there was no federal aid. There were no types of federal programs that went into that district. The school was kept up by that district.

In fact, later on in a one-teacher school I taught in here in Russell County, there were two schools in that district. There were two school buildings that had to be maintained by the people of that particular district. Evidently, this one school lost probably a lot of students. Maybe they grew up and there were no little ones coming in, so they continued to have school in the schoolhouse I taught in. There were really hard feelings between those two factions of people--the people who lost their school and the people who retained their school.

In those days actually the school was the center of activity. They had box suppers. In one of the schools I taught, they had a PTA, Parent/Teacher Organization, and we usually had like a 100-percent attendance. Their activities just revolved around the school, like the programs and the last day of school dinner and whatever there was.

Tonya: It would be nice if people showed that much enthusiasm now.

Bonita: We had a good relationship.

Tonya: How were you expected to conduct yourself in the community? Were there some unwritten rules about ...

Bonita: There were unwritten rules and I still feel that way today. There are just certain things that a teacher doesn't do. That's all there is to it. I was raised in a dancing community and I loved to dance. No one ever told me that I wasn't supposed to dance, but you just knew it was an unwritten rule. Drinking and smoking were out.

When I became a widow, I was young enough to have a man friend later on, five years after I lost my first husband. I was kind of looked down on because you just didn't do some things. I happened to marry the man later on, and he helped me raise my children, for which I am very grateful.

Tonya: What were some of your extra-curricular activities? Was there any?

Bonita: No, I lived in this small town where there was just nothing to do. You just went home and tended to your business, ate supper, and washed the dishes. Even as far as taking homework home, like grading papers, we didn't do too much of that in those early days. Later on we did.

Tonya: You said earlier that they had Christmas parties at the school. Was the school used for anything else?

Bonita: No, not for the community. Not that first school. The first school I taught in Russell County had some people in that district who didn't get along real good, so I talked to my board and we had a card party once a month. It really was a fine thing for the people in that community.



Tonya: It was just for the parents?

Bonita: For the parents. I only had five students--two of those were my own--that year. There weren't too many patrons, but there were enough. This gave them a chance to get together and to socialize. It was a nice thing. They brought refreshments and we played cards.

Tonya: I'd like to talk a little bit about the students' background--their nationality, what their parents did for a living, and the like.

Bonita: It was a country school, so most of the parents were involved in farming. In this first area and where I grew up, most of the people were of German descent. I don't believe any of the children had any language problems because most of them talked English at home and couldn't even talk German. That didn't pose a problem.

We did have one family that first year with a boy in the seventh or eighth grade, and out of eight months of school, he made it for six months. It was a large family and he was the oldest boy and had to help his father with the fall planting or any harvesting that was done. Any type of farm work that was done, he had to help with that. Consequently, he just had six months of school.

I don't think there were any type of handicapped children. As far as I know, none of the siblings or brothers and sisters who weren't in school were handicapped in any way. They just a hardy bunch of people.

Tonya: Since they were from a German background, were there any certain traditions or any activities you did in school that would be different?

Bonita: No, not that I remember. I might add this--there were different religions. In about the second or third country school I taught, somebody came to me and wanted the children to learn Bible verses. For every so many Bible verses they would learn, they would get a free pencil. I asked my school board whether I could do that and they consented. They didn't learn these Bible verses in school, but if they had time or had done their lessons, they might learn the Bible verses and recite them to one another. The ban on prayer wasn't existing then. Like I told you before, we had our morning devotionals.

In the second school I taught, I had two boys from a certain religion, and we would say the Lord's Prayer. The mother of these two boys came to me and she said we don't pray it like you do. I said they don't have to pray it like I do. They don't have to say the Lord's Prayer like I do, but would it be alright if we just bowed our heads and they say their prayer in their own way and we say ours in our own way. She said that would be fine. Nothing ever big came out of that. That's one nice thing about the rural areas.

The greatest times in my life were when I taught country school. Of course, I loved the kids and liked teaching here in town too, but I enjoyed the country school. I ran like a deer. We fixed our own track things. We'd have our own high jump. We'd put two poles up in the spring of the year, and we pole vaulted and ran races. Those were great times.

Those people were just nice people. I remember a birthday party, unknown to me, the children knew I had my birthday. We were out at recess and we were kind of in the back of the school building. We couldn't see what was happening towards the front. While we were having recess, some of the mothers had come in and set up a table. They had a cake and some ice cream or whatever we had for refreshments. The children enjoyed that. It was more of a homey-type place. They understood your problems.

Tonya: What was the name of the school?

Bonita: Well, my first school was called Fairview District 72. By the way, we kept track of our grades in what we called a register. It was just a big flat book and we had to write down the grades for each student, the attendance, and the absentees. At the end of the year, that was turned into our county superintendent.

I don't believe I was ever absent on account of sickness in those days. If you had a cold, you didn't stay home. If a child had a cold, they didn't stay at home unless they were deathly sick or had some other ailment like appendicitis.

Tonya: Did the families have to purchase the books or was that just part of the school?

Bonita: Every family bought books for their own child. There was nothing supplied. About the only thing I can remember that the school district supplied was chalk and sweeping compound and later on drinking cups.

Tonya: They weren't very involved at all. Did you have any idea when the school was built?

Bonita: Like I told you, my brothers and sisters went to school there. I hate to tell you when I was born. Do I have to tell the year? I was born in 1915, so I'll let you figure out how old I am. My brothers and sisters went to that school, so it must have been built in the early 1900's.

Tonya: That's great; it's still standing.

Bonita: I know a lot of them that have tumbled down since then.

Tonya: Do you know what happened to any of your students, where they are now, what they did after they left your school?

Bonita: Yes, I occasionally see some of my first students. I saw one of my first students this summer in Rush County. He's living in the little town where I grew up and from which I taught. He still knew me; surprised that I was still walking around. Yes, I see some of them occasionally. I saw another one I had that same year just last week. She works for United Telephone Service in the office. This fellow I saw in Otis works for an implement shop.